



SERMON OF THE WEEK

First Presbyterian Church of Honolulu at Ko'olau

May 4, 2014

"Navigating Dangerous Waters" - Acts 21:17-23:11

The Rev. Dr. Tim Shaw

Last week we talked about the dangers of sleeping in church. I gave you at least one very important safety tip. Don't sit in the third floor window no matter how warm and stuffy the room is. It's not safe. It's not safe because it is possible that some guy, like me, will talk on and on and on. You don't want to be sitting in the window because you just might fall out the window like the guy in Acts chapter 20 did when he fell asleep in church.

Pastor Paul came to town and held a Bible study one evening after work and he talked for hours. One exhausted young guy, named Eutychus, had worked all day before he came to that Bible study and sat in the window because the room was packed with people, it was warm, and sweaty and stifling. About midnight, as Paul talked on and on and on, this young guy closed his eyes just for a second and fell out the window. Three floors.

So you've been warned. If you pass out in church today and hurt yourself, it's on you. We're doing our part to keep you safe. We keep this sanctuary frigid for your safety.

As we begin to wrap up our study of the Book of Acts we're thinking about what it looks like to be awake to God and what

God cares about. To see what that kind of life looks like, we're going to focus on the spiritually caffeinated life of the Apostle Paul, (yep, the guy who talked on and on and on). Paul was awake to God and what God cares about. Because he was awake to God, Paul was able to figure out what God wanted him to do with his life.

It's a big deal to figure out what God wants you to do with your life. But its an even bigger deal to keep doing what God wants us to do when doing what God wants us to do gets really difficult.

Abby Sunderland was a 16-year-old, high school student from Southern California. A couple of years ago, with her family's blessing, she set out on a journey around the world, by herself, in an effort to become the youngest person to ever circumnavigate the globe in a sailboat, alone. The year before, her brother Zac, had become the youngest person to do that.

At one point in Abby's journey around the world, her parents lost contact with her and for a while it was feared that Abby might be lost at sea. She was found alive but adrift in the middle of the Indian Ocean with the carbon-fiber mast of her boat snapped in half.

As you can imagine, this story sparked a fair amount of a debate about parenting. I read a number of comments about the wisdom of allowing your 16-year old daughter to sail around the world by herself. Those comments basically fell into two camps. Most of the comments I read were from people who thought her parents were probably the most irresponsible people in the history of the world, but there was a smaller group of people who thought Abby's parents must be the greatest mom and dad on the planet.

One person wrote this: "I'm a parent of a very responsible 16-year old and there is no way in the world that I would allow him to travel alone around the world in a boat. The father is certifiably NUTS. That poor girl needs to get the heck away from him. The guy seems to see no difference between sailing the Indian Ocean in 30-foot waves by yourself alone at 16 years of age and driving your car—in terms of danger. There sure better be child endangerment charges placed against her parents. It's the most negligent thing I've ever heard."

And then there was this comment: "I cannot believe all the mediocre comments from these mediocre minds...that's right, just stay home on the couch and watch TV.

There are a thousand reasons not to accomplish great things and you sheep people have listed every one of them one by one. Thank you for your comments, now step aside and go back to watching Oprah or American Idol or whatever it is that you do in your safe little existence. Abby, we need more 16-year olds like you!"

As I thought about Abby and her brother Zac, as I thought about this family, I came to the conclusion that the Apostle Paul must have come from a family like the Sunderlands. As we saw last week, the Apostle Paul can be a little insensitive to the needs people have to get a good night's sleep. But Paul is one courageous disciple of Jesus. As a kid, the apostle Paul must have been like Abby and Zac, willing to face big challenges, maybe a little naïve at times but courageous. Paul's courage grew as his capacity to trust the faithfulness of Jesus Christ grew.

It's interesting that the comments about what Paul decides to do with his life basically fall into the same two categories. Almost everyone we meet in the book of Acts thinks Paul is crazy to want to go back to Jerusalem. Paul is determined to return to Jerusalem and tell his friends what he's learned about Jesus Christ and almost everyone thinks he has lost his mind.

Person after person, in city after city, urges Paul not to go. They all love Paul and they all know it's not going to go well for Paul if he goes back to Jerusalem. Paul has become a Christian and all his former colleagues what to stop Paul from spreading the message of the gospel. Paul knows it's going to be hard but he's going to go to Jerusalem anyway. That takes courage.

In the texts from the Book of Acts that we're going to look at the next two weeks, we're going to see the steely courage of the Apostle Paul who is a person committed to living out the truth of the gospel of Jesus Christ no matter what it costs him. Where does that courage come from and how can we have that same kind of courage as we face the challenges in our lives?

In these texts we're also going to see a stark contrast between people who seek to do justice, to do what is right and fair and those who are not interested in doing justice. We're going to meet people who will use despicable tactics to do everything they can to silence Paul. And some of those people were once Paul's friends.

So, with very good intentions and in response to a clear sense of calling on his life, Paul sets out to do what he believes God is leading him to do and things go horribly wrong. We're going to see how God helps Paul navigate through some dangerous waters that threaten to engulf his life. This same God is with us when we find it difficult to keep doing what God has called us to do with our lives.

It takes courage to do what God calls us to do and it takes courage to keep doing what God calls us to do when it gets difficult, when we're treated unfairly, when our good intentions are met with resistance. It takes courage.

I want to show you a reenactment of one of the most important moments in human history. It was a moment, like the ones we'll be looking at this week and next. It was a moment that required incredible courage. This

scene from the life of Martin Luther is a turning point in human history. Our world is a completely different place today because Martin Luther had the courage to do what we'll see him do in this movie scene.

Luther was a priest in the Roman Catholic Church in the early 1500s. The Roman Catholic Church at the time had become incredibly corrupt and Luther and others challenged the church of their day to refocus their theology and ministry around a handful of core convictions. One of those core convictions is that what we believe should be shaped primarily by what the Bible teaches us. Our theology needs to be shaped by scripture.

Before I show you this clip from the movie, "Luther", let me tell you one of my favorite stories from the Protestant Reformation. I think this story will put our video clip in context.

In the early 1500's the Roman Catholic Church was looking for a way to pay for the building of St. Peter's in Rome. A priest in Germany by the name of John Tetzel came up with an innovative way to raise some money for the church. He went around selling what were called indulgences. The Roman Catholic Church taught, at the time, that there was an intermediate place between this life and the next called Purgatory. Purgatory was a place where those who were destined to go to heaven went to undergo purification so that could achieve the necessary holiness to enter heaven.

What John Tetzel and others would do is travel around the countryside selling indulgences, which were supposed to shorten your time in Purgatory.

What John Tetzel would do is put on terrifying one or two act plays that illustrated how horrible purgatory was. After the play was over, John Tetzel would sell certificates that were supposed to reduce the amount of time a person would have to spend in purgatory. People were so scared about having to spend time in that place that John Tetzel ended up raising a lot of money for the church. That's corrupt.

One day, a man came up to John Tetzel and asked him if he could purchase an indulgence for a sin he had not yet committed. John Tetzel was intrigued with that idea. That was a whole new marketing strategy. So, John Tetzel sold the man an indulgence that would buy him time out of Purgatory for a future sin.

Later that afternoon, that same man jumped John Tetzel, beat him up and stole all of John's money. As he left John Tetzel beat up on the ground he said, "This is the future sin I had in mind."

Martin Luther hated the selling of indulgences. Teaching people that they had to spend time in Purgatory in order to get right with God was inconsistent with the Gospel of Jesus Christ. The gospel teaches us that it is not our faithfulness that saves us. It is only the faithfulness of Jesus Christ that saves any person. It's only by grace and through faith in Christ alone that a person is made right with God.

There is nothing that anyone needs to add to the finished work of Christ on the cross in order to be saved. There is no need for a place called Purgatory. So Martin Luther opposed John Tetzel and all the other corrupt, unbiblical teaching of the church.

Like the Apostle Paul, Martin Luther got himself in a lot of trouble with the religious and secular authorities of his day. He challenged their authority because they were teaching things that were not consistent with what scripture taught. In this scene, Martin Luther is brought before both the leadership of the church and the leadership of the state. They demand that he recant what he's written. Take it back! They give him one chance to agree with them that he is the one in error and not the church. (video clip is shown).

The courage of Martin Luther changed the course of human history. What about you and me? What might God be calling us to do that just might change the future of our families, our friendships, our marriages, our businesses, the direction of our education, our church? Most likely, it will take courage to make the necessary changes. Maybe God is calling you to seek counseling for a fractured marriage. Maybe He's calling you to deal with an addiction that has a stranglehold on your life. Maybe God is inviting you to commit your life to Christ or recommit your life to Him and begin to let him shape your life and priorities so that you are more awake to what God cares about.

In our remaining time this morning, let's look briefly at what happened to the Apostle Paul when he did what God wanted him to do with his life. When he arrives in Jerusalem, his friends immediately warn him that there are people who are out to cause him trouble.

His friends in Jerusalem counsel Paul to do something that will show the people who are out to get him that the things being

said about Paul are not true. But even though he does those things, it doesn't go well for Paul.

Acts 21:27 When the seven days were almost completed, the Jews from Asia, who had seen (Paul) in the temple, stirred up the whole crowd. They seized (Paul), **28** shouting, "Fellow Israelites, help! This is the man who is teaching everyone everywhere against our people, our law, and this place; more than that, he has actually brought Greeks into the temple and has defiled this holy place." **29** For they had previously seen Trophimus the Ephesian with him in the city, and they supposed that Paul had brought him into the temple. **30** Then all the city was aroused, and the people rushed together. They seized Paul and dragged him out of the temple, and immediately the doors were shut.

People accuse Paul of defiling the Temple by bringing Greeks into the inner courts of the Sanctuary. This was simply not true. The charge made against Paul is ironic because it's made while Paul was undergoing a rite of purification so he would not defile the Temple. Paul had not brought his Gentile friends into the inner courts of the Temple. It was a lie. Facts are inconvenient things for people hell bent on achieving their ends at any cost. When we play fast and loose with the facts of a situation to achieve even a noble end, that is an act of injustice. And now the situation gets completely out of hand.

31 While they were trying to kill (Paul), word came to the tribune of the cohort (that's the military commander) that all Jerusalem was in an uproar. **32** Immediately (the Tribune) took soldiers and centurions and ran down to them.

When they saw the tribune and the soldiers, they stopped beating Paul. **33** Then the tribune came, arrested (Paul), and ordered him to be bound with two chains; he inquired who he was and what he had done. **34** Some in the crowd shouted one thing, some another; and as he could not learn the facts because of the uproar, he ordered (Paul) to be brought into the barracks. **35** When Paul came to the steps, the violence of the mob was so great that (Paul) had to be carried by the soldiers. **36** The crowd that followed kept shouting, "Away with him!"

Soldiers from the Antonia Fortress on the northwest corner of the Temple grounds came running and rescued Paul from the hands of the crowd intent on killing him. Luke uses the same Greek verb to describe what the rioters do and what the soldiers do. The crowd seized Paul (v. 30) in order to kill him and the soldiers arrest Paul (v. 33) in order to protect him. Luke is going to paint a dramatic contrast between the violence and the threats of the crowd and the justice of the Roman authorities.

Acts 21:37 Just as Paul was about to be brought into the barracks, he said to the tribune, "May I say something to you?" The tribune replied, "Do you know Greek? **38** Then you are not the Egyptian who recently stirred up a revolt and led the four thousand assassins out into the wilderness?" **39** Paul replied, "I am a Jew, from Tarsus in Cilicia, a citizen of an important city; I beg you, let me speak to the people." **40** When (the Tribune) had given him permission, Paul stood on the steps and motioned to the people for silence; and when there was a great hush...

That's where we're going to have to pause the story until next

week. Luke is painting a dramatic contrast. The crowd assumed that it was true that Paul had brought Greeks into the inner courts of the Temple. They did not bother to determine whether that was actually true. The facts didn't matter to them. The people who wanted to cause trouble for Paul would do whatever it took to enrage the people so that they could achieve their objective of silencing him. That is an act of injustice.

Claudius Lysius, the Roman Tribune had assumed that Paul was an Egyptian terrorist, but immediately changed his mind when he learned the facts. BUT even before he learned the facts, the Tribune did what was right. He protected Paul from the madness of the crowd even before he found out who Paul was. That is justice in the face of injustice.

When the Roman Tribune discovered that Paul was not an Egyptian terrorist he allowed Paul to speak to the crowd. That speech will not go well. Paul will say something to the crowd that will be like a lit match thrown on a pool of gasoline. But we'll have to wait until next week to see what happens.

That's what it can look like to live a courageous life that is awake to God and what God cares about. Courage is possible not when we look inside ourselves for the strength we need. Courage comes when we look to Christ, the one who holds our lives in His hands.

The source of Paul's strength, the source of his courage was his deep, settled confidence in the truth of the gospel and his confidence in the faithfulness of God. It was the reality of the resurrection of Jesus Christ that

framed all the other realities in his life. His courage came from a deep trust in God.

What about you and me? What is God calling you to do, to face, to change, to stop doing, to start doing, to keep doing? What is God calling you to do even though it might mean you have to face significant challenges and difficulties? Is there a place in your life, a relationship where you need to draw a line? Do you need to walk away from an abusive relationship, an unhealthy workplace? Do you need to say, "No" to someone who continues to treat you badly? Do you need to recognize Christ's presence in your life and hear His words of confirmation and encouragement? We will see many of those same choices lived out in the life of the Apostle Paul in the weeks to come.

Jesus Christ knows, from personal experience, that doing God's will takes courage. He experienced separation from God on the Cross, when He took upon Himself the sins of the world. He experienced that utter loneliness so that you and I would never have to experience it. This Table is a reminder and it is an expression of the fact that God is with us and will be with us whatever happens.

What might God be calling you to do that just might change the course of your life? Things may get difficult when you set out to do what God is calling you to do. Things may be difficult right now—and that might just be because you are right where God wants you to be.